

Sermon for March 6, 2016– Lent 4

Luke 15:11-32 (NIV84)

**Theme: The Forgiving Father**

- 1) *He forgives the selfish*
- 2) *He forgives the self-righteous.*

<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. <sup>25</sup> "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup> "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' <sup>31</sup> " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

This heartbreaking scenario is becoming all too familiar: a young man or woman who grew up in a Christian home and, perhaps, even attended Christian schools, becomes embittered against God. Instead of seeing the Christian religion as a relationship with their loving LORD, they view it as a set of arcane rules and stories preventing them from fulfilling their desires. And so they leave – not only their congregation, but their former faith as well. They leave - embarking on a quest to find happiness and fulfillment in what the world offers.

Why does this happen? Couldn't anything be done to prevent it? What is God's attitude towards those who fall from faith? What should our attitude be towards them?

Let us listen to Jesus' answer these questions in his famous story of the prodigal son, under the theme: **Our Forgiving Father**. 1) *He forgives the selfish.* 2) *He also forgives the self-righteous.*

Part One: *He forgives the selfish.*

*There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.*

The younger son in this parable represents people who grow up in the Church, but instead of focusing on the LORD's love for them, they feel resentment towards God – much like a teen might feel resentment towards his parents. Why? Because they hear their friends talk about their freedom and how much fun they are having living on their own terms with no restrictions. They want to have the same freedom, but God's "rules" are preventing that. Yes, God has told them time and time again that his commandments are for their good and protection, but their worldly friends have convinced them that they're just being used - kept under the control of religion. If there were a heavenly Father that loves them, wouldn't he let them be free to do whatever they want?

And so, like the younger son, they demand to be free. They want their "share" of the estate – that is, all the earthly blessings to which they feel they are entitled.

Notice that the Father gives in to the younger son's demands. Why? I suppose he could've said "No" and forced the son to stay. But wouldn't that have just furthered the son's resentment towards his father? In a similar way God knows that forcing Christians to remain in faith will not get them to love him. This is why, with great sadness, he often allows those demanding to be free to go and use - for their own earthly purposes - the time, talents and treasures he gave them.

*Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.*

The word translated as "wild" in our text literally means "unsaved". In other words the younger son was living as one who rejected salvation. This is often how those who leave the Church live: spending all their time, talent and money on making life for themselves easy and enjoyable. They do whatever they want, whenever they want.

*After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

When a person desires to live without the LORD, the LORD, after a time, may allow a person to lose everything he holds dear. Why? Is it punishment? No, more often than not it is to give a

person a glimpse of what life without Him is truly like: empty and hopeless. He does this in the hope that they will come to their senses and repent.

But instead of repenting, God's wayward children, more often than not, look to the world for help – hoping that others will pity them and show them kindness. They soon realize, however, that the help the world offers is not really help at all! Many people take advantage of those who are in need. This, too, the LORD allows – revealing mankind's selfishness and wickedness in ways that can't be ignored.

*When he [the younger son] came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'*

Praise God: the son in our text came to his senses. Experience taught him that the world is a deceitful place. It promises love, happiness and help, but – in the end – it only disappoints.

Oh, how sad it is that many people come to this point, only to despair. And why? Because they refuse to take the step this younger son took: they refuse to acknowledge that life in God's house is far superior than life in the world. In God's house a heavenly Father watches over and cares for even the least of his servants. Few truly care for others in the world, and when they do, it is often as a means to serve their own ends.

This is why this Son is determined to return home and confess his sins to his father – trusting that he would forgive him. What gave him this hope? Nothing that he had done - that's for sure. No, rather he remembers the love his father continually expressed to everyone in his household. The hope of mercy moved him to come home.

What was true for this lost son, is true for every believer who has fallen from faith: the LORD's love is what ultimately brings a person back to God. When events in life have led a person to acknowledge how hopelessly sinful they are, they don't need God's law preached to them anymore. They need to be reminded of God's mercy, providence and love. They need to be reminded of the Gospel.

*So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."*

What love God the Father has for his lost children! He loves them so much that he sent Jesus to pay for the sins of every person on this earth – regardless of whether or not they repent. He loves his lost children so much that he actively looks for their return – working in all things to bring them back to faith. And when they, realizing their sin, turn to him for mercy? He runs to meet them – embracing them with his love.

*"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'" "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe*

*and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'*

God is not like us, who feel that we have to test and probe when people say they're sorry. He accepts our repentance even before we speak it – forgiving us for Christ's sake. Right after we repent, God clothes us with a robe of Christ's righteousness. He welcomes us back as his sons – giving us greater honor than we deserve. He calls all heaven to rejoice with him because He is so happy to have us back.

This is the forgiving love God the Father has towards his selfish children who run away from him to pursue the world. He patiently waits for them to come to their senses – working in everything they experience towards that end. Everything he allows in their life, he allows in love. And when they do turn back to him in repentance, he willingly forgives everything – no questions asked. So great is the Father's forgiving love – not only towards the selfish, but – as we will see next - also towards the self-righteous.

#### Part Two: He forgives the self-righteous son.

Not everyone was happy with the younger son's return. We read: *"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 'The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'"*

The older son represents self-righteous "Christians". They may be life-long, active members of a congregation – working hard to serve God - but herein lies the problem: they do not serve God out of love, but out of obligation. They come to church because they feel they have to come to church. They try their best to keep God's law because they feel they have to keep his law. Secretly, however, they desire to be free – to enjoy the pleasures of the world – but fear keeps them from doing so. When they see a very sinful person repent, they think it is unfair that God should forgive them without any further requirement. "They got to do what they wanted, but we didn't. Why should God accept them back as if nothing ever happened?"

How often aren't we like this older brother, secretly desiring the things of this world and begrudging those who get to experience them? But the truth is that we don't know how good we have it. The younger brother learned from experience that a sinful life is no life to be desired. Why not? Because it is a life absent of God's presence and love.

*"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.*

So greatly God has honored us that we can ask Him for anything in his name and He promises to give us what we ask for – all in accordance with his good and gracious will. As sons in God's house, He is always with us – protecting us and providing all we need. We are not slaves, but sons – all according to his mercy and grace.

Yes, sometimes we need a kick in the pants to remind us how good we have it in the Church: blessings of forgiveness, peace, love and eternal life through faith in Christ. Notice the father lovingly calls the older son to realize these great blessings. He does this because he sees that the self-righteous son is in danger of resenting him – just like the younger son did earlier in life. This is why he lovingly calls him to repent: to see that the life the younger son lived was really no life at all. *This brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."*

Dear brothers and sisters, each one of us knows someone who has fallen from faith and is embittered towards religion. What should our attitude be towards such a person? Don't envy or begrudge them; rather love them. Earnestly pray for them. Share the Gospel with them whenever you can – reminding them of the great blessings we have as children in God's house. God will use your witness to call them back home. Understand the forgiving love God has for both the selfish and the self-righteous. Rejoice in this love yourself, and share it with all of God's lost children. Amen